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IMPACT OF AMERICAN CINEMA

ON NUCLEAR GEOPOLITICAL IDENTITY

by

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ABSTRACT

American cinema has shaped and reinforced nuclear ideological geopolitics in the United States since the beginning of the Cold War. Early on, motion pictures were used to support costly investments in nuclear technology and illustrate the futility of nuclear war to policymakers and the public. When US nuclear strategy appeared to shift away from deterrence later in the Cold War, American cinema pushed back by graphically showing the effects of nuclear war to the public. The impact even reached the Oval Office, contributing to a strategic shift away from Mutually Assured Destruction to Mutually Assured Survival. Whether an existential ideological threat from the Soviet Union, or the emergence of nebulous threats from terrorists and rogue states, movies have provided a critical medium to shape and reinforce America's geopolitical identity. Nuclear weapons remain the most significant threat to US national security, and American cinema will remain a critical medium to influence the geopolitical nuclear narrative.

Introduction

"If it can be written, or thought, it can be filmed." - Film Director Stanley Kubrik[1]

A typical American family gathers around their television to watch a widely publicized movie. The first hour chronicles the everyday lives of ordinary Midwestern American families including haircuts, barbeques, and farming. Parents watch restlessly while their children become bored and uninterested. Suddenly, the unthinkable happens as mushroom clouds explode over Kansas City, Missouri. Children's eyes widen in shock as characters previously introduced are vaporized on screen. After a couple of minutes, the terrified children ask whether this could really happen. Their parents' mouths agape, no words of comfort are offered.

This scenario played out in millions of households on November 20th, 1983 when ABC premiered the made-for-television movie *The Day After*. While perhaps the most shocking, *The Day After* was not the first movie to explore nuclear geopolitics between the US and the Soviet Union. Motion pictures have played a significant role in defining and influencing American nuclear geopolitical ideology since the beginning of the Cold War. Early in this period, the US military used cinema as propaganda to justify advanced nuclear bombers and missiles intended to reinforce America's perceived technological superiority. By the late 1950s both sides had acquired thermonuclear weapons capable of striking any point on Earth. The resulting parity convinced America's public and policy makers that victory could be as costly as defeat.[2]

From the later 1950s through the end of the Cold War, filmmakers produced movies exposing the horrors of nuclear war to the public and political leadership. These movies reinforced the writings of Brodie and other theorists, emphasizing deterrence as the only acceptable ideological narrative involving nuclear weapons. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hollywood filmmakers continued to highlight the dangers of nuclear weapons. Modern

cinema has profoundly affected US nuclear strategic policies; establishing, reinforcing, and influencing the ideological narrative by illustrating the perils and catastrophic effects of nuclear war to the general public and policy makers. Furthermore, American cinema effectively highlighted post-Cold War ideological insecurity, where the existential Soviet threat was replaced by multiple smaller scale nuclear challenges from Russian nationalists, terrorists, and rogue states.

Establishing the Cold War Ideological Paradigm

During the early 1950s, America's primary geopolitical motivation centered on self-defense to mobilize public support for foreign and military policies.[3] Military spending accounted for 10-15 percent of US Gross Domestic Product; the highest level of military spending from World War II to the present.[4] Due to rapidly advancing aviation technology, a significant percentage of that budget was spent on US long-range strategic bombers. The Air Force Strategic Air Command (SAC) leadership viewed strategic bombers as cornerstone of US nuclear defense, providing a retaliatory capability against a Soviet first strike.[5] The strategy required a large fleet of technologically advanced bombers capable of responding if the US nuclear command and control network was disabled.[6] The Air Force turned to Hollywood to effectively communicate the strategic bomber's critical role in protecting against Soviet aggression. The message was conveyed by the 1955 Paramount film *Strategic Air Command*, starring legendary film actor and former World War II bomber pilot Jimmy Stewart.

Strategic Air Command chronicled the story of Colonel Robert Holland, a major league baseball player and former World War II bomber pilot recalled to active duty. The movie served primarily as a commercial for SAC, and included several minutes of footage showing B-36s and B-47s flying against majestic backdrops. The movie was financially supported by the Air Force,

and the premiere was attended by senior officers including the AF Vice Chief of Staff.[7] The movie stressed SAC's importance to American strategic defense, with a bomber crewman stating "…every day in SAC is a war."[8] When Colonel Holland's wife questioned his commitment to SAC during peacetime, he responded that "there is a kind of war going on."[9] The movie identified the limitations of the current B-36 fleet and revealed the newly developed B-47 bombers, capable of greater range and payload capacity. During one of the movie's briefing scenes, the SAC commanding general remarked that "...one B-47 with three crew members has more destructive power than the entire B-29 fleet against Japan." In the same scene, the SAC Commander emphasized the aircraft's contribution to US national security, equating the B-47's capabilities to "…less danger of war," representing the "…best hope from keeping a war from ever starting." [10] Even the B-47's improved range is conveyed through the movie's non-stop mission from Florida to Japan, expressing the passage of time through a montage of spectacular B-47 aerial shots. During the movie's final scene, the SAC commander laments his "…uphill battle to keep SAC going", and retain officers like Col Holland. [11]

Strategic Air Command was well received by critics. New York Times movie critic Bosley Crowther, gleefully described the "...airplanes, the roaring engines, the cluttered cockpits, the clouds and sky. These are the things that make your…heart leap with wonder and pride."[12] The film was marketed as the first opportunity for average citizens to witness top secret mission briefings and see inside the technologically advanced SAC bombers. Extensive interior and exterior aircraft footage highlighted the advanced B-36 and B-47 bombers to domestic and international audiences. While never explicitly identifying the Soviet threat, the message that SAC was a critical enabler for US national security was directly communicated to audiences.[13] *Strategic Air Command* showcased the highly advanced US nuclear bomber fleet and reinforced

America's nuclear and aviation technological superiority to the public. However, the feeling of superiority did not last beyond 1957, when the Soviet Union successfully launched a man-made object into space.[14]

Defining the Geopolitical Parity

According to Freedman, "no event focused popular attention on America's vulnerabilities to attack more than the launching of the world's first artificial satellite, *Sputnik I*".[15] This event convinced the public that the US did not possess a technological advantage that would protect them against a Soviet nuclear attack. By 1957, Brodie and other nuclear strategists had also accepted that preventative war could not effectively neutralize the Soviet's retaliatory capability. Leading policy makers now advocated nuclear deterrence strategy due the near parity between the US and Soviet capabilities.[16] Additionally, in the late 1950s Hollywood was emerging from its own ideological crisis tied to Communism. Senator Joseph McCarthy's crusade to purge Communism from Hollywood had severely restricted filmmakers from producing movies that criticized preventative war and early 1950s nuclear strategies. [17] However, by the late 1950s McCarthy had been discredited and censured by Congress. The emergence of deterrence theory and Senator McCarthy's downfall opened the aperture for Hollywood filmmakers to illustrate America's growing fear of nuclear war. Romanticized images of US bomber pilots valiantly defending against the Soviet threat would be forever replaced with the horrible realities of nuclear war.

On the Beach, released by Stanley Kramer productions in 1959, represented the first film in a new genre illustrating the hopelessness of nuclear war. The movie stars Gregory Peck as Dwight Towers, commander of the submarine USS Sawfish. The USS Sawfish is underway when a nuclear war destroys the northern hemisphere. The crew travels to Australia, which

largely escapes the initial devastation. However, it is determined that nuclear radiation from the war will soon spread to Australia and kill everyone living there. The submarine crew attempts to enjoy their final days, but elect to return to the US after radiation levels start to rise. The movie's final scene shows a deserted Melbourne eerily devoid of any life, featuring a sign that reads "there is still time brother."[18]

On the Beach was a critical and financial success, screened worldwide by audiences that included the Japanese royal family. The Los Angeles Herald Express remarked that the film was "…one of the most important pictures ever made."[19] Crowther praised the film's cast and powerful message, describing the "...candid and awesome terms of nuclear annihilation surrounding each character in the film."[20] The growing realization that even the winner of a nuclear war would face catastrophic destruction was echoed in US strategic policy circles. [21] While not directory involved in the film's nuclear war, Australia was destroyed when the radiation clouds reached its shores. While ominous, the film's final scene ultimately conveys hope, serving as a double meaning to avoid a real-world nuclear war. Hollywood's message to the American public now mirrored Brodie's assessment that "total nuclear war is to be avoided at almost any cost."[22]

The early Cold War period culminated during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, where the US and Soviet Union narrowly avert a nuclear exchange. The crisis underscored that tensions between US and Soviet leaders remained high and could quickly spiral out of control. In January 1964, Columbia pictures released Stanley Kubrik's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Stopped Worrying and Love the Bomb,* satirizing nuclear policies of the early Cold War. The film focused on incompetent political and military leadership as the pre-cursor for a nuclear war between the US and Soviet Union. Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper, commander of an Alaskan B-52 strategic

bomber wing, manipulated his pilots into executing Plan R, a full nuclear response to a Soviet sneak attack. Plan R embodied Cold War paranoia, requiring a communications blackout to prevent Russian spoofing, ensuring bombers would continue to their targets. General Ripper believed that his first strike would force the National Command Authority to launch a full pre-emptive nuclear offensive. He assumed America's only hope to avoid a catastrophic nuclear retaliation will be to destroy the Soviets before they can respond.

Once General Ripper launches his bombers, the remainder of the movie then highlights the National Command Authority's ineffective control the situation while negotiating with the Soviet premiere. The senior Air Force commander, played by George C. Scott, supports pre-emptive war stating that US civilian casualties would *only* be 10 - 20 million. However, the Soviets reveal that their computerized Doomsday Device will destroy all life on earth in response to any nuclear attack. The US president attempts to diffuse the situation by working with the Soviets to find and destroy the bombers while the Army retakes Ripper's SAC base. Although the bombers are successfully recalled near the movie's climax, one missed the recall due to a radio malfunction. The resulting strike triggers the Doomsday Device, which launches a full-scale nuclear exchange, wiping out humanity while Vera Lynn's "We'll Meet Again" plays in the background.

Dr. Strangelove represented the antithesis of *Strategic Air Command*, portraying Air Force leadership as womanizing warmongers that believed preventative war was the best option to defeat the Soviet Union. The movie also continually mocked Strategic Air Command, ensuring their motto "Peace is our Profession" is clearly visible during the film's most violent moments. The movie debunks preventative war's primary tenants by satirically introducing the Doomsday Device, which guarantees world-wide destruction if the Soviet Union is attacked.

This premise satirized the entire 1950s nuclear arms race, revealing the Soviets created their Doomsday Device based on a claim that America was already working on similar technology. When pressed for an explanation for developing such a weapon, the Soviet ambassador proclaims they could not afford a doomsday gap. The Doomsday Device scenario counters the technological superiority strategy presented in Strategic Air Command, since improved technology only served to increase lethality. The movie's climax illustrating a total nuclear war caused by a single disabled B-52 also underscored Brodie's conclusion that thermonuclear weapons made strategic bombing too destructive to serve as anything except a deterrent.[23]

Dr. Strangelove also highlighted multiple nuclear ideological themes that would persist through the Cold War and beyond. While AF leadership represented the principal antagonists in the movie, it explored a deeper ideological paranoia where a real-world Soviet general or politician could be substituted for the comical General Ripper. Throughout the Cold War, the cultural propensity for Soviet aggression remained an underlying concern for the American public and policymakers. Specifically, Landis emphasized RAND analysis stating the "Soviet Union would exhibit a preference for preemptive, offensive use of force...rooted in Russian history of insecurity and authoritarian control." [24] Regardless of the statement's validity, the fear that the Soviet Union would strike first would persist throughout the Cold War.

The Ripper scenario also stressed concern over nuclear weapon access and launch authority, an issue elevated into the American consciousness during the Cuban Missile Crisis. It emphasized that delegated nuclear launch authority below the NCA could result in miscommunication or outright disregard for the chain of command, leading to an unauthorized launch. Finally, the movie explored America's emerging concern over computerization of launch authority through the Doomsday Device. The Soviet Ambassador explained the Doomsday

Device would be triggered automatically when any predefined site was attacked, operating outside the control of the premiere or military leader. This automated control ultimately led to the nuclear war at the film's climax, when Ripper's bomber struck a launch complex. Delegated launch authority themes will persist in the American geopolitical consciousness and be revisited in future nuclear war movies.

American Ambivalence

After the release of *Dr. Strangelove* in 1964, major motion pictures involving nuclear weapons and war essentially disappeared from American cinema. While the James Bond franchise continued to explore the topic, the movies were adaptations of Ian Fleming's novels published in the 1950s and early 1960s.[25] The absence of nuclear war films in the 1960s and 1970s reflected the public's growing acceptance of nuclear weapons.[26] Between 1959 and 1964, the number of Americans that identified nuclear war as the "nation's most urgent problem" dropped from 64 to 16 percent, and in subsequent years it declined even further.[27]

This apparent apathy can be attributed to multiple factors. First, the Cuban Missile Crisis served as a catalyst for long-term arms control negotiations between the US and Soviet Union. Specifically, the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty, the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) which occurred throughout the 1970s showed progress in reducing the threat of nuclear war.[28] Second, many members of the 1950s US anti-nuclear movement became highly involved in protesting the Vietnam conflict, drawing focus away from the nuclear debate.[29] Finally, Americans became accustomed to the persistent ideological threat of nuclear war. Yale psychiatrist Dr. Robert Jay Lifton coined the term "nuclear-induced psychic numbing" to describe humanity's need to continue their lives despite the existential danger posed by nuclear weapons.[30] Ultimately, the American public could not

endure repeated exposure to movies like *On the Beach*, described by US Civil Defense Director Leo Hoegh as producing "…a feeling of utter hopelessness."[31] Even *Dr. Strangelove* approached the nuclear debate from a satirical point of view, allowing audiences to laugh at the absurdity of nuclear policy. The total nuclear war at the movie's climax served as a punch line versus a fear-inducing warning of the world's destruction.

Redefining the Geopolitical Balance

The Reagan administration in the early 1980s placed renewed emphasis on US nuclear strategy, focusing on modernization and a shift in geopolitical identity. Deterrence had remained the principal US nuclear strategy through the 1970s, ensuring sufficient capability for Mutually Assured Destruction against the Soviet threat. However, Freedman noted "…the Reagan administration was deeply distrustful of Soviet intentions [and] considered past arms control agreements to be 'fatally flawed.'"[32] The administration accused the Soviets of destabilizing relations by violating the SALT agreements and continuing their nuclear buildup.[33] As a result, policymakers revisited nuclear geopolitical strategies, centering on victory in scenarios where deterrence failed. Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger was even quoted as stating that anyone in his position "...not planning to prevail" across the range of military operations, including nuclear war "...ought to be impeached."[34] The Administration planned to modernize and improve the US nuclear arsenal, including deploying the MX missile, designed to be survivable against a Soviet first strike. The combination of perceived Soviet aggression and US modernization brought nuclear war back into public consciousness. *WarGames* and *The Day After*, both released in 1983, reinforced earlier ideological narratives by reminding policy makers and the public that nuclear war could not be won.

WarGames, debuted in June 1983 by United Artists, illustrates the futility of nuclear war through a rogue artificial intelligence system called the War Operations Plan and Response (WOPR). The WOPR is given control over the entire US ICBM fleet after 22 percent of missile operators fail to launch when given a presumably valid presidential order. The WOPR's lead engineer convinces the president's National Security Advisor to transfer launch control to the computer system, enabling launch authority to remain with the president versus independent operators that could question orders. The WOPR is advertised as the ultimate strategist, continuously analyzing world threats to optimize the US response to any conceivable nuclear exchange scenario. A young computer hacker named David Lightman, played by Mathew Broderick, bypasses security and infiltrates the WOPR. While exploring the system, he inadvertently initiates a thermonuclear war game scenario. The Government traces the break-in and Lightman is arrested and interrogated as a spy. While in custody, he determines the computer cannot differentiate a war game from reality, concluding the simulation may lead to an actual nuclear war. Lightman escapes custody and attempts to locate the WOPR's original programmer, whom he hopes can terminate the scenario.

The opening sequence revisited the delegated launch authority theme. In this scenario, the missile operators attempt to get clarification of authenticated presidential orders before launching, violating SAC procedures. The WOPR is proposed as the means to remove launch officers from the chain of command and ensure that the best possible nuclear strategy is executed in response to any threat. While the WOPR AI system was far beyond current technology, the scenario paralleled America's 1980s nuclear modernization. Specifically, the Reagan administration needed to address ICBM fleet’s technical and procedural vulnerabilities. Additionally, there was a striking similarity between the WOPR's strategy "to win the game" and

the administration's desire to prevail in a nuclear engagement. Casper Weinberger's comment that any Secretary of Defense not planning to prevail "should be impeached" correlated almost directly with the computer's strategy to execute a winnable strategy. The movie's primary message was emphasized during the climax, when the WOPR correlated tic-tac-toe with nuclear war. The Lightman character forced the WOPR to play tic-tac-toe in an infinite loop against itself, which is unable to identify a winning scenario. The WOPR then evaluated all possible nuclear exchange scenarios, from a first-strike by the Soviet Union to smaller regional exchanges such as India-Pakistan. After determining that every scenario resulted in total nuclear war, the WOPR concluded "…the only winning move is not to play."[35] The film emphasized that even regional scenarios can result in a total nuclear war between the major powers, regardless of who initiated the exchanges. The filmmakers explicitly reinforced the deterrence geopolitical narrative, reminding policymakers that winning a nuclear war means never starting one.

While *WarGames* reemphasized deterrence, *The Day After* graphically showed the horrors America would suffer if attacked with nuclear weapons. *The Day After* featured an ensemble cast including veteran actor Jason Robards. The movie was viewed by an estimated 100 million Americans, garnering higher ratings than any other made-for-television movie.[36] Nicholas Meyer accepted the offer to direct after three other directors turned down the opportunity due to the film's graphic portrayal of nuclear holocaust.[37] Meyer reported repeated illnesses during filming, diagnosed as severe clinical depression as a result of the film's premise of nuclear war.[38]

The movie's screenwriters purposely chose Lawrence, Kansas as the primary since the city was located in the center of the continental US. This location symbolized that everyone in America would be affected by a nuclear war.[39] The movie's first hour shows Midwesterners and

Air Force alert crews going about their daily lives. In the background, viewers glean details about increasing tensions with the Soviets over West Berlin. The characters refuse to believe the escalating tensions will result in a war, reinforcing Dr. Lifton's concept of "nuclear-induced psychic numbing." During various television reports leading up to the nuclear exchange, the Soviets close off West Berlin and follow with a full invasion of West Germany. As a result of the invasion, low yield nuclear exchanges occur between Soviet and NATO troops. The full realization of total nuclear war is hammered home when the citizens of Lawrence witness US ICBMs launching into the afternoon sky. The characters realize they only have moments before the Soviet missiles reach the US. There is a two minute sequence showing the destructive effects of Soviet missiles destroying US targets. The remainder of the film shows the terrible destructive force wrought by the nuclear exchange, including massive deaths and widespread radiation sickness. The movie depressingly ends with most of the surviving characters succumbing to radiation sickness or dying in the resulting chaos.

The Day After had a profound effect on both the American public and President Reagan. After the movie premiered, ABC operated hotlines to help viewers cope with the movie's message.[40] After viewing the film, University of Kansas anthropology professor John Janzen remarked, "…the overwhelming feeling I have is the hopelessness of what would follow a real nuclear war."[41] Janzen summarized the feeling of many Americans, whose personal living rooms had been invaded with terrible images of nuclear holocaust. Since the film was viewed by so many people, the emphasis on preventing a nuclear war again permeated America's ideological consciousness.

After viewing the film, President Reagan stated it was "…very effective and left him extremely depressed."[42] According to history professor Robert Toplin, "...the president was

deeply touched...by films about warfare, since movie scenes struck him emotionally and remained strong in his memory."[43] Toplin further asserted, "*The Day After* seems to have impressed him with the importance of reversing a dangerous course in the Cold War."[44] Reagan's second-term policies shifted from modernizing America's nuclear strike capabilities to protecting America and the world from nuclear war, focusing on what Freedman terms "mutually assured survival."[45] First, he initiated the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program designed to protect the US against a Soviet nuclear attack. Although technologically immature, the Reagan Administration invested billions of dollars to develop this capability. To preserve the deterrence balance, he even offered to share the SDI technology with the Soviet Union, ultimately seeking to end the threat of nuclear war.[46] Additionally, he reengaged nuclear arms control agreements with the Soviets.[47] Reagan had deep ties to Hollywood as a former actor and took the messages portrayed by filmmakers to heart, modifying US geopolitical strategies accordingly.[48] *The Day After* appeared to play an important role in shaping US foreign policies which now focused on treaties and technologies which would make nuclear weapons obsolete.

Post Cold War Ideologies and Nuclear Strategy

By the end of the 1980s the Soviet Union was collapsing due to poorly executed political and economic socialist reforms. However, instead of a violent military revolution or political uprising, the Soviet Union's geopolitical identity simply disappeared. John Agnew described the resulting geopolitical environment as "extreme ontological insecurity, a widespread sense of uncertainty about how to organize world politics in its absence."[49] After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the existential threat from a unified Evil Empire transformed to nebulous nuclear threats left by its absence. These threats emerged from poorly secured Soviet nuclear weapons stockpiles that could be stolen, sold to terrorists, or fall under the control of local warlords.[50]

American filmmakers in the 1990s also adapted their nuclear narratives to the changing geopolitical ideology by focusing on loss of control and rogue Russian leaders.

In 1995, Hollywood Pictures released *Crimson Tide*, starring Gene Hackman and Denzel Washington, as the captain and executive officer (XO) of the nuclear submarine USS Alabama. The film's premise follows the deployment of the USS Alabama in response to a Russian nationalist revolt. In the movie's opening scene, nationalist forces seize control of a nuclear submarine base and ICBM launch complex. The USS Alabama is deployed to support a potential first strike if the nationalist forces threaten to launch ICBMs against the US or Japan. The USS Alabama is attacked by a rogue submarine controlled by nationalist forces, damaging their communications array. Before the engagement, the USS Alabama received an authenticated emergency action message (EAM) to launch SLBM sorties against the nationalist-controlled ICBM complex. During the subsequent engagement an additional EAM was partially received, resulting in a mutiny between the captain and XO. The movie climaxes with an armed bridge confrontation between the two officers, who agree to wait three minutes for the damaged radio to be repaired. Fortunately, the radio operators repair the radio and receive the EAM stating nationalist forces had surrendered and ordering the Alabama to stand down. As the Admiral states at the end of the movie, by the letter of the law the captain and XO were "both right...and both wrong."[51]

Crimson Tide enjoyed box office success and was largely praised by critics. Roger Ebert commented favorably, pointing out the complexities between two characters that are neither good nor evil.[52] The film revisited Cold War nuclear ideologies while highlighting new strategic realities. First, delegated launch authority was explored again, this time from the perspective of the USS Alabama's commander and XO. The movie established the USS Alabama had received

a valid EAM directing nuclear weapons launch. While the missiles were being readied, another EAM was partially received, causing confusion and disagreement between the senior officers. Since the subsequent EAM could not be authenticated, the commander followed the previous order to launch. The delegated launch issue becomes more complex in this scenario. The commander is technically executing proper procedure by following his last authenticated order to launch weapons. While the real-world procedures for nuclear missile launch required additional crew cooperation, the movie presented an interesting scenario questioning final launch authority.[53] As the movie concludes, the following text is displayed:

> "As of January 1996, primary authority and ability to fire nuclear weapons will no longer rest with US submarine commanders...principal control will reside with the president of the United States."[54]

While the film did not specifically attribute this decision to the movie's premise, the script was certainly reviewed by Naval officials prior to filming. The Navy needed to preemptively allay concerns that the movie's scenario could actually occur onboard a US nuclear submarine.

Additionally, the film highlighted growing concern over the security of the Russian nuclear arsenal. *Crimson Tide's* fictitious scenario actually resembled a real-world security breakdown during the 1991 Russian coup. According to Freedman, the “authority to launch nuclear weapons [laid]...in the hands of two of the plotters...who [ordered] an increase in combat readiness in case the Americans reacted militarily."[55] While the attempted coup was brought down relatively peacefully, concerns over Russian nuclear weapons security did not abate during the 1990s. This theme reoccurred in the 1996 Twentieth Century Fox film *Broken Arrow*.

Broken Arrow starred John Travolta and depicted a rogue US B-2 bomber pilot attempting to steal nuclear weapons. While the film enjoyed moderate financial success, it was dismissed by critics like Roger Ebert as introducing an interesting premise but degenerating into

a fight between the two main characters.[56] While the film failed to explore the implications of nuclear weapon security, it reinforced the idea with the American public. While the movie's plot centered on a rogue US B-2 pilot, the situation could be plausibly applied to the less secure Russian nuclear arsenals. Even the US Congress recognized the severity of poor Russian nuclear weapon security, initiating the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program. This program provided US resources to assist Russians with their "loose nukes" problem.[57]

As the 1990s progressed, the world became increasingly multi-polar, and the US struggled to define its strategic policy. Controversial political theorist Samuel Huntington identified with Muslim author M.J. Akbar in his 1993 thesis "Clash of Civilizations", who predicted "the West's next confrontation is definitely going to come from the Muslim world." During the 1990s, American films rarely addressed religious terrorism from groups like Al-Qaida. While the 1993 World Trade Center Bombing and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing made US headlines, the events did not permeate the American consciousness or Hollywood plotlines. However, the horrors of September 11, 2001 highlighted terrorism and rogue states as the new primary threats to the US homeland.

Twenty-First Century Nuclear Threats

The 9/11 terrorist attacks employed low technology methods, using hijacked commercial airliners to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The likelihood of another US airliner hijacking is negligible, and policymakers hypothesized that future terrorist attacks would involve weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. Osama bin Laden was specifically questioned about the use of weapons of mass destruction after releasing "The Nuclear Bomb of Islam." He stated "that acquiring nuclear weapons for the defense of Muslims is a religious duty."[58] Additionally, rogue states such as Iran and North Korea renewed efforts to

acquire nuclear weapons. In 2002, North Korea admitted actively pursuing a nuclear weapons program and terminated further International Atomic Energy Agency inspections.[59] By 2006, North Korea's lead negotiator warned, "the United States should be concerned about the possibility of fissile material being transferred to third parties or nuclear weapons being transferred to third parties."[60] *The Sum of All Fears* and *Team America: World Police* represent two post 9/11 films that accurately captured Agnew's continually evolving ontological insecurity, where terrorists and rogue states have subsumed Russia as the primary US threat. Both movies effectively highlighted emerging threats where small nuclear arsenals would be available to an increasing number of state and non-state actors.

The Sum of All Fears, a 2002 film adaptation of a 1991 Tom Clancy novel tells the story of a Russian neo-Nazi group attempting to start World War III. The movie follows rookie CIA analyst Jack Ryan, played by Ben Affleck, as he attempts to determine the source of a nuclear weapon smuggled into the US and detonated in Baltimore, Maryland. Ryan struggles against time to determine the responsible party while the US and Russia prepare for nuclear war. The movie climaxes with an impassioned correspondence between Ryan and the Russian president, who explains that neo-Nazis attacked Baltimore to force the Russians and the US into a full nuclear exchange. Ryan successfully convinces the Russian president to stand down his attack, which the US president reciprocates, resulting in a peaceful resolution.

Although appearing to echo many Cold War themes, *The Sum of All Fears* also depicts US security challenges in the multi-polar world. The movie's opening scene shows the US National Command Authority simulating a Russian nuclear first-strike. The movie's tone seems ominous until the President receives a call phone call from his wife reminding him about a black-tie dinner. The interruption causes everyone to laugh and the exercise is terminated. The CIA

Chief even suggests future scenarios include an adversary other than the Russians. The movie accurately illustrates the post Cold War strategic climate, where a nuclear exchange between the US and Russia now seems impossible. The scene also reinforces Agnew's ontological insecurity since the NCA members agree the scenario is outdated, but cannot recommend a replacement for the Russian threat.

Due to post-9/11 political sensitivities, it was less controversial for Paramount to adapt *The Sum of All Fears* to a neo-Nazi threat versus a more realistic threat from a terrorist group like Al-Qaida. The neo-Nazis plot was described by NY Times movie critic Stephen Holden as "cartoonish [and] ludicrous."[61] However, the potential that Al-Qaida would detonate a nuclear or radiological bomb in a major American city similar to the Baltimore scenario remained a grave concern for policy makers and the public. The Baltimore scenario also challenged deterrence theory, since the entire US nuclear arsenal could not protect against this new type of threat. Nuclear strategists also openly questioned the value of deterrence in the post-9/11 multi-polar world, where the Cold War Soviet existential threat was replaced by limited but serious threats from rogue states or terrorists.[62] While a terrorist or rogue state could not destroy the US, they could still cause massive damage by detonating a nuclear device in a major American city. The film also highlights America's lack of intelligence when assessing these emerging threats. *The Sum of All Fears* included political and military intrigue from Russian scientists, international terrorists, and Syrians modifying a nuclear bomb lost during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. While the movie's intrigue is exaggerated, the post 9/11 ideological confusion complicates intelligence gathering, as evidenced by the incorrect assessment of Iraq's nuclear weapons program maturity prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom.

While *The Sum of All Fears* describes the emerging multi-polar nuclear threat through an implausible neo-Nazi plot, *Team America: World Police* codifies specific threats from Islamic terrorist and rogue states. Ironically, the film integrates rhetoric from influential theorists like Freedman and Huntington into a potentially relevant real-world scenario, brilliantly illustrating Agnew's ontological insecurity and uncertainty. *Team America: World Police*, written and produced by *South Park* creator Trey Parker, satirically chronicles a small special forces team protecting the world against WMD threats from terrorists. The movie's characters are portrayed as marionettes similar to the 1960s children's television series *Thunderbirds*.

The movie opens with Team America engaging stereotypical Middle Eastern terrorists attempting to detonate a nuclear weapon in Paris, France. Team America successfully prevents the terrorists from detonating the bomb, but destroys most of the city in the process. Team America members seem oblivious to the destruction, boldly proclaiming "we stopped the terrorists," while the citizens of Paris look on horrified at the damage.[63] The movie then follows Team America as it attempts to stop terrorists from destroying other world landmarks. Unfortunately, faulty intelligence fails to identify that North Korea has been providing the nuclear material to the terrorists, resulting in the Panama Canal's destruction. Once the association between North Korea and the terrorists are revealed, Team America engages Kim Jung Il and his supporters in the film's climax.

While recruiting a new Team America member, their leader proclaims "...some people want you dead...they're called terrorists, and they hate everything about you...Every minute of every single day the terrorists are planning to kill...everyone who lives in a free country."[64] This definition closely parallels Al-Qaida political rhetoric and the 2002 US National Security Strategy. Osama bin Laden openly declared "it is the duty of Muslims to prepare as much force

as possible to terrorize the enemies of God."[65] As a result, the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) specifically redefined terrorism, stating "traditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy whose avowed tactics are wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents."[66] Both the movie and the NSS identify the nuclear threat from terrorists and rogue states as the major threat facing the free world.

Team America: World Police also makes an insightful connection regarding nuclear weapon proliferation between North Korea and terrorists. The film was released in 2004, two years before North Korea's lead negotiator warned of the transfer of fissile materials to third parties. The relationship between North Korea and the Islamic terrorists portrayed in the movie can be directly associated with Huntington's "Confucian-Islamic Connection [which] has emerged to challenge Western interests, value and power."[67] Both the terrorists and Kim Jung Il desire to destroy the West in the film, highlighting the perceived cultural divide between the US and non-Western states. The cultural divide is further elaborated by the complete lack of situation awareness by Team America's members. The team uses indiscriminate violence to protect free Western societies, causing significant damage in the process. Although the movie approaches the topic satirically, it effectively highlighted the significant cultural disparities between the US and other western nations regarding its role as the world's sole superpower.

The movie also illustrates the potential danger from America's new deterrence policies, which according to Freedman include "pre-emptive action to respond to developing threats."[68] During the film's opening scene, Team America preemptively attacks the terrorists planning to strike Paris. While the scene comically exaggerates collateral damage, it effectively stressed the destruction that can occur as a result of preemptive action. The shocked reaction from French citizens also underscores that this preemptive policy is not supported by many Western nations

traditionally identified as US allies. Additionally, *Team America* connects the dangers of preemptive action with faulty intelligence. The movie mocks America's poor intelligence through Team America's computer system, ironically called INTELLIGENCE. The computer system predicts that the terrorists would be unable to execute another attack after Team America's Cairo operations, but does not factor the connection between North Korea and the terrorists into its analysis. As a result, the Panama Canal is destroyed, causing Team America's leader to chastise the computer yelling "that was bad INTELLIGENCE, very bad INTELLIGENCE"[69] Team America underscores the danger of faulty intelligence and the confusion resulting for a lack of a clear adversary. Although intended as a comedy, *Team America* effectively integrates US strategic policies and cultural divide, highlighting emerging threats still prevalent a decade after its release.

Conclusion

Since the end of World War II, Hollywood has acutely affected US nuclear strategic policies by establishing, reinforcing, and influencing ideological geopolitics. The film industry's ability to posit plausible strategic scenarios detailing nuclear politics, coupled with overtly illustrating nuclear devastation touched the psyche of the American public and strategic policy makers, including at least one former US president. *Strategic Air Command* embodied America's early Cold War geopolitical narrative, establishing US nuclear technological and strategic superiority over the Soviet Union. When this perceived superiority vanished, American cinema shifted its ideological narrative to reinforcing nuclear strategic balance by emphasizing the futility of nuclear war through *On the Beach* and *Dr. Strangelove*. During the early Reagan administration, nuclear strategies focused on previously discounted narratives to prevail against a Soviet attack. As a result, the administration began modernizing America's strategic forces,

proposing weapons capable of surviving a nuclear attack. The renewed emphasis on winning a nuclear war caused Hollywood filmmakers to revisit legacy Cold War themes in *WarGames* and *The Day After*. These films stressed the senselessness and horror of nuclear war, graphically detailing its effects. After the Cold War ended, the existential Soviet threat was replaced by opaque threats from Russian nationalists, terrorists and rogue states possessing nuclear weapons. *Crimson Tide, Broken Arrow, The Sum of All Fears* and *Team America* codified these emerging nuclear threats from an increasingly multi-polar world, where differentiating allies and adversaries based on ideology became more difficult. While the nuclear threat has changed significantly since the dawn of the Cold War, the dangers posed remain a constant fixture in American strategic discourse. The 2010 NSS continues to identify nuclear weapons as "the greatest danger to the American people and global security."[70]

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